

### **Symbolism and Text Painting in Tan Dun's *Marco Polo***

Recent opera repertoire has seen a wide variety of styles in opera composition. *Marco Polo* represents a rather unique corner of this wide variety. Tan Dun explores a capacious array of influences in this work. Starting from his own roots, Chinese traditional music, he explores European art tradition to some extent. Tan Dun also touches the styles and elements that are present along the journey of Marco Polo. What makes *Marco Polo* an interesting case study for symbolism and –to use the “old” term- madrigalism<sup>1</sup>, is the fact that this opera incorporates so many different allusions and remarks alongside with direct references. Tan Dun does not refrain from using direct references to elements outside of the European art music idiom which were/are generally left as distant allusions when used by Europe-origin composers. This might be because of the confidence brought out by the fact that he is of Chinese origin and the general opinion of European art music community that one should always embrace their own roots. This is, of course, just idle speculation. Here, the article will try to demonstrate aforementioned elements within with concrete musical examples.

Tan Dun describes the departure point for composing *Marco Polo* as the longing to find the answer to the question that was posed to him by a Southern Chinese Monk

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<sup>1</sup> Text painting.

twenty years ago<sup>2</sup>: “Do you compose music, or does the music compose you?” From this point, Tan Dun arrives to the universality of phenomenon: “Marco Polo is everyone and everything; you, me, and it.”<sup>3</sup> Tan Dun also quotes here the librettist Paul Griffiths saying that he describes the opera “well”. Paul Griffiths states that “journeys are like dawns in having no beginning or ending but only continuing”<sup>4</sup>. This quote from Paul Griffiths clearly shows Tan Dun’s inspiration, besides Chinese philosophy and traditions, from the Japanese concept *ma*.

*Marco Polo* consists of 3 different “journeys” as Tan Dun calls them<sup>5</sup>: Physical, Spiritual, and Musical. There are three journeys in spite of the title of the opera, which is “an opera within opera”. Physical and Spiritual journeys are axiomatic operas mentioned in the title. The musical journey is the auxiliary tool that accompanies the other “operas” throughout the overall journey.

Physical journey is about the actual story of Marco Polo, which he travels from Venice to Beijing. This story can be thought similar to composer’s own life journey. Where Marco Polo travels from Italy to China, Tan Dun traveled the opposite way, which is from China to USA<sup>6</sup>. This story is lived by the split formations of consciousness of Marco Polo –Marco, representing the real Marco Polo in flesh, and Polo, representing the memory of Marco Polo- and Rustichello, the cowriter of Marco Polo’s autobiography who actually accompanies Marco Polo through Physical journey. However as Tan Dun asserts that the only real characters in *Marco Polo* are

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<sup>2</sup> Tan Dun, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Tan Dun, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Tan Dun, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Tan Dun, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, n.d.

Marco and Kublai Khan<sup>7</sup>, so Rustichello can be thought as an imagination of a companion rather than the physical embodiment of Rustichello himself. Spiritual journey is about introspection. This story follows the inner world of Marco Polo as well as the nature. As Tan Dun describes it Spiritual journey reflects “on the three states of the human being –past, present, and future- and on the cycle of nature”<sup>8</sup>. In this journey, Marco and Polo are consorted by different figures from history and nature, and shadows that are beyond humanistic beings. Spiritual journey also incorporates a narrator. Figures from the history and nature are: Dante, Shakespeare, Sheherazada, Li Po, Mahler, and Water. Musical journey is one, which has no characters in it but rather the orchestra and the audience travel together alongside “actual” storylines. The musical journey that accompanies Spiritual journey is largely based on Beijing Opera tradition. As Meritz mentions, one can think the representation of more than one character using only one actor/singer is also an important influence of Beijing Opera tradition when one looks at the larger scale structure of *Marco Polo*<sup>9</sup>. The rest of the musical journey, which follows Physical journey, incorporates more discrete stylistic differences. When Physical journey occurs in Venice, music is mainly influenced by European tradition. As Physical journey moves towards east, music becomes more “Eastern” going through Middle Eastern, Indian, Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese traditions in accordance with the physical location of Marco.

Apart from pitch relations used in music, Tan Dun uses different composition techniques in order to create different musical styles. For example, he extensively

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<sup>7</sup> Tan Dun, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Tan Dun, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Meritz, 2009.

uses indeterminacy as a tool of composition. His indeterminacy method can be seen in special instructions of the score (Figure 1). A large number of vocal and percussion parts use this kind of staff throughout the opera. As a more traditional type of indeterminacy, Tan Dun uses improvisation technique. He states where is to be improvised on the score. His thought of this as a more traditional method can be derived from the fact that improvisation is used mainly in characteristically Eastern parts<sup>10</sup>.

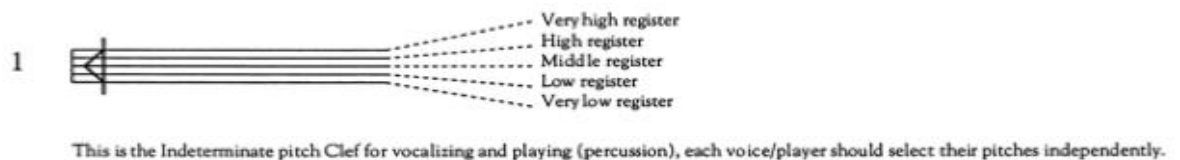


Figure 1. Indeterminacy in *Marco Polo* score

If one starts to look at more specific occurrences of symbolism and word painting, one can observe these examples spread across the opera. Figure 2 shows the beginning of the *Book of Timespace: Winter*. There appears the tempo marking “Peking Opera Style ♩ = 50~60”. There is also a stereotypical Eastern melody that follows this tempo marking in Violin I. The melody is embellished densely with grace notes, and while the main note is an almost constant E5, the grace notes move around to give the desired effect. This type of easternized musical elements can be found in all the parts of *Spiritual journey*. As another example, one can look at the beginning of *Book of Timespace: Spring*. Figure 3 shows the score of this section. One can observe that orchestration drastically changes at that moment. Percussion instruments used are Xylophone, Peking Opera small gong, pipa, and Chinese cymbals. The

<sup>10</sup> e. g. Sitar solo in “Desert” scene.

rhythm is highly complex and non-Western and a very small rhythmic motive is repeated.

Handwritten musical score for the beginning of *Book of Timespace: Winter*. The score includes staves for Percussion (Perc.), Piano (P. Pno.), Harp (Hp.), Marco (M), Polo (P), Violin I (Va. I), Violin II (Va. II), Viola (Va.), Vocal (Vc.), and Cello (Cb.). The Percussion part features a complex, non-Western rhythm. The Piano part has a section marked "(with pedal)". The Harp part is marked "(sliding with a cello)". The Marco and Polo parts are written in a style labeled "Peking Opera Style" and include lyrics: "have not told" and "one half of what". The Violin I part has a section circled and labeled "Peking Opera Style J=70-80". The Vocal part has a section circled and labeled "Solo".

Figure 2. Beginning of *Book of Timespace: Winter*

Next, one can observe the relationship between Marco and Polo in musical terms. At first, these two characters appear together in the opera. However during *Book of Timespace: Winter*, they get separated and they do not musically contact again until *Wall (continued)* in Beijing. In the beginning Marco and Polo follow each other musically very closely (Figure 4). Their selected ranges of singing (in terms of indeterminacy) fall in the same register. The words are identical and Polo follows

with rhythmical variation. This close relationship gets separated throughout the opera. Starting from interchanging syllables , Marco and Polo end up interchanging phrases<sup>11</sup>. But at the big climax point of the opera, Marco and Polo meet again and become one again with a homophonic duet (Figure 5).

THE BOOK of TIMESPACE: SPRING

$\text{♩} = 98$  ( $\text{♩} = 176$ )

FL.

Ob.

B<sup>b</sup>Cl.

Bn.

I 2

Hn. II 4

I

B<sup>b</sup>Tpt. II

I

Tbn. I

Tbn. II

Chinese symbols

① Peking Opera Small Gong

② Xylophone (hard sticks)

③ Peking Opera Big Gong

Pipa player

58

Figure 3. Beginning of *Book of Timespace: Spring*

M. *like last time time time*

P. *like* *la- -s t la- i t i t i t i t s t*

<sup>11</sup> Tan Dun, 1997.



Figure 7 is a musical score for a "Traditionally European Choral section". It features vocal parts for Dante, Soprano (S), Alto (A), Contralto (C), Tenor (T), and Bass (B), along with instrumental parts for Violin I (Vn. I), Violin II (Vn. II), Viola (Va.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The vocal parts have lyrics: "pe, she the sha-pe, shape of fear Co-ming go-ing". The instrumental parts include dynamics like "ppp" and "mf". A handwritten "6/4" is visible on the right side of the score.

Figure 7. Traditionally European Choral section

Figure 8 is a musical score for a "Monophonic chant imitation". It features vocal parts for M/P, W., Sh. 1, Sh. 2, and Sh. 3, along with instrumental parts for C., Vn. I, Vn. II, Va., Vc., and Cb. The vocal parts have lyrics: "go go go go". The instrumental parts include dynamics like "p", "mf", and "f". A handwritten "6/4" is visible on the right side of the score.

Figure 8. Monophonic chant imitation



Another traditional European harmony appears in *Piazza* scene, this time it is choral. It is accompanied by a descending string *glissando* (Figure 7). With these two distinct examples, Tan Dun clearly establishes some sense of place. However Tan Dun gives more specialized hints in terms of geography and the missing time indication is to be indicated during this scene. Figure 8 demonstrates Tan Dun's imitation of monophonic chant that was in use during medieval era in Europe. Even though the actual music is clearly not monophonic, the fact that indeterministic registers of distinctive vocal lines are the same and that the vocal lines enter in a Renaissance imitation fashion strongly suggest –if not Medieval- a pre-Baroque European vocal tradition. This figure (8) also shows the first occurrence of the obsession with the word “go”, which is to be discussed later. Towards the end of *Piazza* scene, Tan Dun gives absolute information, musically, to the listener regarding the place of this “piazza”, even though it is rather clear from the language of the name of the place. Polo begins singing in Italian in a very *bel canto*-like style with its dense *legato* markings and highly melodic lines (Figure 9).



Figure 9. *Bel canto*-like singing by Polo

This *bel canto* melody is, towards the end of *Piazza* scene, is supported by a big Romantic era orchestration (Figure 10). This also marks the first full-textured moment in the opera. *Sea* scene that follows *Piazza* in Physical journey does not add anything different stylistically. Musical journey stays in mostly European territory, which was the case in the previous scene.

When *Sea* is crossed, Physical journey arrives in a Middle Eastern *Bazaar*. Musical journey shows its location by placing an Eastern melodic progression with a male voice choir. This melody appears in string section of the orchestra then further developed in brass section (Figure 11).

104

Fl.

Ob.

B♭ Cl.

Bn.

Hr. I

Hr. II

Trpt. I

Trpt. II

Tbn. I

Tbn. II

Perc. ①

Perc. ②

Perc. ③

P. Pno.

Hp.

P.

- zia ven- to ven- to al- tre il ran- zio al- tre il vi- ci- no

Vn. I

Vn. II

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

-20-

Figure 10. Full texture orchestration

10

FL.

Ob.

B. b Cl.

C. Bn.

I

Hr.

II

I

B. Tpt.

II

I

Tbn.

II

Tbn.

①

Flv.

②

③

P. Pic.

Hp.

R + T  
D

every face a mar-2 k 2 k 2 k 2 k tra-ding in what can be

Vn. I

Vn. II

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

- 99 -

Figure 11. Beginning of *Bazaar*. The Eastern melody.

After another Spiritual journey break<sup>12</sup>, Polo finds himself in *Desert*. *Desert* is the first scene that a significant change in orchestration occurs. Until now, Musical journey made use of Western instruments, even though in the previous scene, musical and physical location was Middle East. However starting with *Desert* scene, Tan Dun makes use of genuine traditional instruments in the orchestra. Following the scene change, after a short while, a sitar-tabla duet appears (Figure 12).

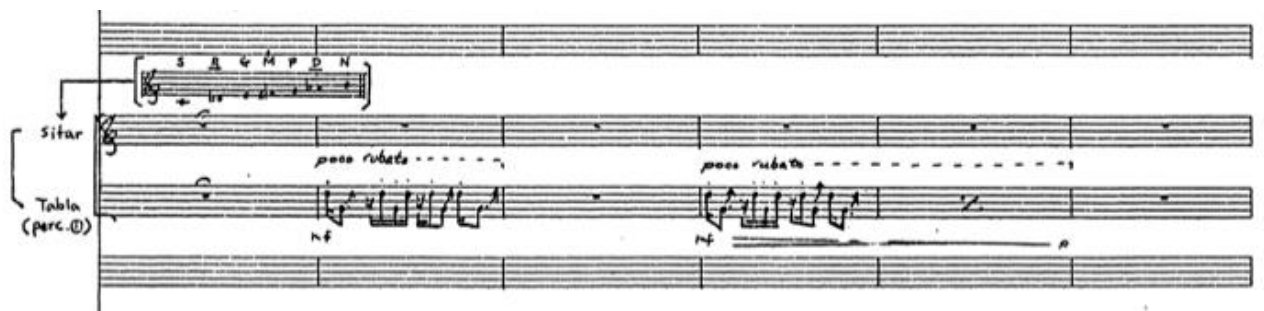


Figure 12. Sitar-tabla duet in *Desert*

In this scene, Tan Dun also gives sitar the permission for improvisation, which again is the first occurrence of improvised sections of the opera and it is followed by later wholly improvised/indeterminate<sup>13</sup> sections.

The chant-like vocal section signals the arrival to the Tibetan monks on Himalaya Mountains after scene change (Figure 13). The chant is marked as “Misterioso” in the score, which depicts the mysterious aura that is present. This chant is also coupled with the use of Tibetan singing bowls in the orchestra, thus strengthening the image of *Himalaya*.

<sup>12</sup> *Book of Timespace: Summer*.

<sup>13</sup> In terms of time (Cage-ian time-varied indeterminacy).



Figure 13. “Himalaya” chant with Tibetan singing bowls

One of the most obvious musical style alterations occurs, when Physical journey arrives at the Wall’s Mongolian side (Figure 14). Tan Dun clearly states “Mongolian Overtone Singing” here, and Polo starts among the choir and other characters<sup>14</sup> singing in Mongolian style.

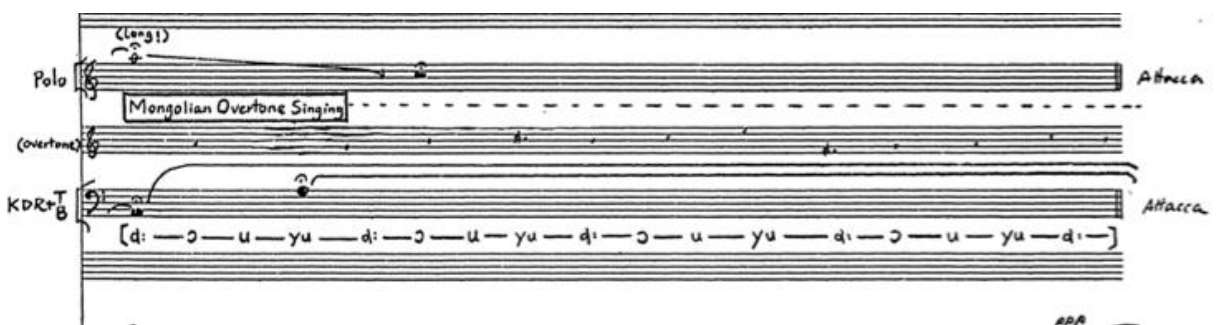


Figure 14. Mongolian overtone singing

Musical journey as well as Physical Journey ends at the Chinese side of the Wall. Tan Dun symbolizes the arrival with a pipa solo (Figure 15). Furthermore, Polo, for the last time, changes his language and starts singing in Chinese (Figure 16).

<sup>14</sup> Kublai Khan, Dante, Rustichello, and T+B choir.

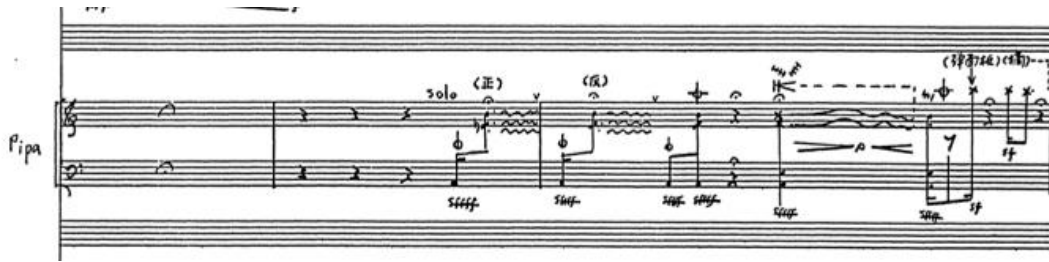


Figure 15. Pipa solo in *The Wall* (continued)



Figure 16. Polo's line where he sings in Chinese

After the general symbolized journey that Musical journey provides, one may look into more specific musical objects, contradictions, or even *Leitmotive*. However I will not be calling these musical objects/text paintings *Leitmotive*, because when one considers Perle's definition of *Leitmotive*<sup>15</sup>, I will not always be looking for a second occurrence of a specific object or motif and *Leitmotive* term –in my opinion- does require a German/Austrian context, which is absent in this case. These text paintings may or may not be about the internal content of this opera. The reason I say that it may *not* be about the internal content of the opera, is because this opera somewhat depicts a journey similar to Tan Dun's own as mentioned in the beginning of this article, there may be some allusions to external factors that are relevant to composer's own life. And my reasoning related to this fact is supported by the apparent existence of at least one such case as described shortly above.

<sup>15</sup> Perle, 1989.

A concrete occurrence of the phenomena described in the previous paragraph can be observed when one looks at the idea of remembrance throughout the opera. The idea of remembrance or memory appears three times in this opera. The first occurrence is in *Sea* scene. Second and third appearances are in *Bazaar* and *Himalaya* respectively. Even though in all three cases, music is supposed to be elsewhere –Europe, Middle East, and Himalaya-, when memory is mentioned, a clear Chinese<sup>16</sup> motif appears in orchestration. First occurrence is when Polo reminisces about a “forest city” (Figure 17). Immediately follows the line “What a place that was” is the Chinese motif played by the brass section. The second appearance is with the word “memory” at the page turn (Figure 18). The Eastern melody is orchestrated in different registers this time. And the final occurrence is Marco’s “rememberings” where strings section plays the melody (Figure 19). The connection of this musical object and an external factor of the opera is wherever Physical and Musical journey may be, music after/during reminiscent moments always point to China, which strongly suggest the reminiscing done by not Marco Polo but the composer himself since Marco Polo should not be reminiscing about China when he talks of home. In a similar fashion, one can also interpret the whole of Spiritual journey as an incarnation of Tan Dun’s spiritual journey when one looks at it strictly in musical terms.

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<sup>16</sup> This is my own aural judgment relating the mentioned motifs to the ones that are used in Book of Timespace scenes.



**A**

The musical score is written on five systems of staves. The first system is enclosed in a black box and contains a 'Solo' section with piano (p) dynamics. The second system is empty. The third system is empty. The fourth system is empty. The fifth system contains vocal lines with lyrics: 'What a place that was' and 'forest ci-ty.'

Figure 17. Memory no. 1

**K** *Andante fulgente*

272

Fl.

Ob.

B.Cl.

Bn.

Hr. I

Hr. II

B.Tpt. I

B.Tpt. II

Tbn. I

Tbn. II

Perc. ①

Perc. ②

Perc. ③

P. Pho.

Hp.

(ct. cl. qf) (qf)

All *Andante fulgente*

-ly

*Andante fulgente*

Va. I

Va. II

Vc. I

Vc. II

Cb.

-61-

Figure 18. Memory no. 2

The image shows a musical score for a scene titled 'Memory no. 3'. The top system features a vocal line (M.) with the lyrics 're-mem-be-rings' and 'chi'. The bottom system features an instrumental section with five staves: Vn. I, Vn. II, Va., Vc., and Cb. The instrumental section includes the lyrics 'Tutti can sord.' and 'gliss.'. The score is written in a standard musical notation with various dynamics and articulations.

Figure 19. Memory no. 3

Another important concept that emerges musically throughout the opera is obsession. There are two distinct kinds of obsession occurring: obsessions on the words “go” and “gold”. Firstly, the obsession on the word “go” starts early on. As mentioned above, it starts with Figure 8. Except for the first (Figure 8) and second (Figure 20) occurrences, shadows and the choir force the other appearances. In the first two appearances, all the characters are present. This obsession or insistence on the word “go” symbolizes the need for this journey of Marco Polo. And the fact that it is usually enforced by the shadows symbolizes the internal need rather than an external coercion. Finally there is no appearance of this type of object after Physical journey moves beyond Venice or *Piazza*. There are 4 types of stressing the word “go”. First one is demonstrated in Figure 8 as a monophonic chant-like object. Second type is accentuated and homophonic as shown in Figure 20. Third type is continuous and



between, intensifying in dynamics with each repetition with *crescendo*. An example is shown in Figure 23.

**I**  
242

*Rec.* *(as high as possible)*

*high as possible*

*high as possible*

*high as possible*

*high as possible*

*Change to B.*

*Serena Ser.*

*Serena Ser.*

*Chorus Song*

*Tam Tam*

*P. Pno.*

*no pedal*

*Hp.*

*W. A. + S. A.*

*P. R. + T. S.*

*Vn. I*

*Vn. II*

*Va.*

*Vc.*

*Ch.*

*no same as Vc*

Figure 22. “go” climax



Figure 23. “gold”

According to the big climax moment of the opera, Tan Dun may be said to have thought reaching to the Chinese side of the Wall as the main purpose of this journey of Marco Polo. This climax occurs in *the Wall (continued)* scene. The re-meeting of Marco and Polo, one of the rare moments of full orchestration, the insistence of the word “wall”, all occur at the same time. Figure 24 shows this moment in full score. After this moment, things settle down in general and there no other peak moments in terms of music or story.

In conclusion, in this opera, Tan Dun depicts a journey, which seems very dear to his heart. He shows his refined skills as a text painter. There are many more text paintings than those that are discussed in this article, which would be redundant to talk about them all. Even though some of these paintings are rather obvious, there are also some subtler ones. And Tan Dun demonstrates his clear ideas about certain symbols about different cultures that are encountered throughout this journey.



[illegible]

Figure 24. Climax



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